

Unit 20: Nauru: Topside

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Facts

Population:	13,770 (July 2008 Estimate.)
Highest point:	Topside (61 m)
Language:	Nauruan (official) and English
Religion:	Protestant (66%), Catholic (33%) and others
Independence:	31 January 1968

Glossary

<i>Lat erir</i>	transformation of our island into a waste land after phosphate open-cast mining
<i>Oegaga</i>	green bushland, natural state before phosphate mining
<i>Temonibe</i>	born of a chiefly family
<i>BPC</i>	British Phosphate Commission
<i>Temonibe</i>	The traditional senior matrilineal class. Heads of family lineages could only be drawn from this class of Nauruan society.

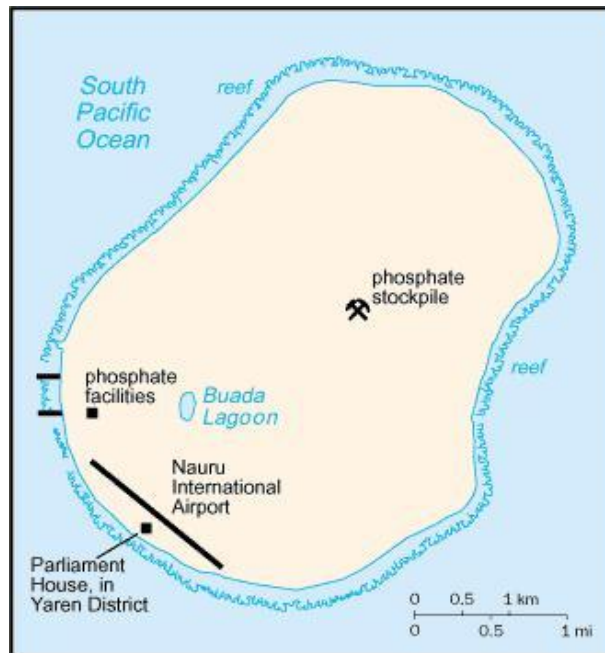


Figure 20.1. Map of Nauru

This chapter is about phosphate mining, land ownership and culture on Nauru Island.

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- explain the meaning of the words “landscape” and “heritage”
- describe the links between events, people and places
- understand the link between people and the spiritual (supernatural)
- describe how a community’s heritage is passed on from earlier generations

History of Topside

The modern history of the Topside on Nauru Island is a lively story of human involvement with phosphate mining. Topside is a raised central plateau. It is the main mining area of the island. There is a narrow fringe of flat coastal land (called Bottomside) around the raised central plateau. This was the area used for villages and housing.

So the story begins... Once upon a time, Nauruans did not know that their island of phosphate was worth hundreds of millions of dollars. The discovery of phosphate in Nauru Topside was made in

1899. A young chemist, Albert Ellis, working for the Pacific Islands Company in Sydney conducted a chemical test on a piece of rock from Nauru. This rock was being used as a doorstopper in his Sydney office. The rock had been taken to Sydney in 1896 by Henry Denson after he visited Nauru. The result of the test revealed the content of seventy-eight percent phosphate of lime.

The mining of this phosphate rock on Topside became so profitable that Nauru was destined to be known as the Treasure Island of the Pacific. The phosphate is used on farms all around the world because it enriches the soil and increases grass and crop growth.

Before mining began, Customary Law offered security of tenure for Nauru's landowners. The Topside lands were all under individual land ownership, so the mining company signed deals with chiefs and landowners. The company paid royalties on the amount of phosphate rock removed. Compensation was also paid for the loss of trees, loss of access and loss of land. After mining, the land was no longer arable (able to be farmed).

The Nauruans were literally selling their Island. Nauru was then a German colony (*See Figures 20.3 and 20.4*), but the mining company was British. Most of the managers and overseers were Australians. The first shipment of phosphate was in 1907.

The Topside landscape and its human activity have an interesting history. But the phosphate will one day run out and the mining will stop. (In 2010, mining of second grade phosphate was resumed due an increase in the world price) Eventually, there will be no more mining royalties paid to landowners or taxes to the government. Topside will have lost its economic value.

Because of mining, the forest was removed, so Topside has also lost its local food varieties. How will Nauruans be able to live? The significance of Topside in the future rests entirely on whether environmental damage can be repaired and controlled.

The Topside in its **Oegaga** (natural state) has been snatched away by vigorous phosphate open-cut mining. Topside has turned into **lat erir** (useless, wasted environment).

Questions and Activities

Fill in the blanks

Circle the best answer to complete the sentence:

1. Nauru Topside was _____.
(a) barren land
(b) a lake
(c) grass land
(d) **Oegaga**
2. The discovery and exploitation of _____ forms an integral part of the history of Nauru.
(a) iron ore
(b) phosphate of lime
(c) magnesium
(d) copper
3. The company that first mined Topside came from _____.
(a) Germany
(b) Britain
(c) Australia
(d) Nauru
4. Nauruans were literally _____.
(a) selling their island
(b) ignoring their island
(c) conserving their island
(d) only lending their island
5. The first shipment of phosphate was in _____.
(a) 1896
(b) 1899
(c) 1907

Topside to the Nauruans

Several important activities made Topside a useful place for Nauruans. Firstly, Topside **Oegaga** was the centre of traditional activities and was related to the supply of food. Second, all the land on Topside was owned and subject to Customary Law. Third, it was a useful area to relax and escape from the crowds and housing in Bottomside.

The narrow coastal strip around the island was the residential area. To go to Topside was to Nauruans what a trip to the country was for city residents. Noddy birds, an important supplement to diets, were caught on the pinnacle outcrops of rocks on Topside. Finally, Topside provided timber used for the construction of houses and the building of canoes. The magnificent *tamano* trees that grew on Topside were the most valued possession a Nauruan could have.

Work and roles of men and women

The role of women was very important in helping men engage in activities on Topside. Starting at the ages of seven or eight, girls were instructed by the old women about their later life. They studied everything told to them and remembered it by reciting it over and over.

In a family most of the work was done by the women. A woman was excused from her work only if she came from a ***Temonibe*** family, a senior matrilineal family with more authority and privileges than other families.

It was a woman's role to keep the house and garden area clean, care for the children, look after the fresh water supply, collect wild fruits on Topside and fish on the reef for shells and shellfish. She was also expected to get the raw materials from Topside to weave mats, skirts, aprons and baskets. Women also had to design shell decorations and to produce the colouring and dyeing substances.

A man's work was to build houses and canoes, fish in the sea, catch noddy birds by net, harvest coconuts, collect *toddy* (palm wine), make pottery, tools, weapons, and keep his fishing gear intact. Most of the materials for these jobs came from Topside. Sometimes a man would help in the cooking of special dishes. During the annual harvest of the pandanus fruits, men often took an active part in cooking.

Both male and female activities were closely associated with the Topside land. The seasons also controlled the movement of people to and from Topside.

Questions and Activities

6. Complete these two sentences:

- a) A Nauruan woman was expected to _____.
- b) A Nauruan man was expected to _____.

7. List eight reasons why Nauruans would go to Topside.

Topside before mining

In the distant past, Nauruans had a belief in magic. Animal and plant substances were collected from Topside for the magician and his mysterious rituals.

Some people became magicians because the soul of a dead relative lived with them. In their hearts Nauruan people feared their dead relative's ghost. Before eating, a bowl of food was prepared and placed in a selected spot within the hut for the dead man's ghost to eat.

On Topside, on the cliffs above Anibare Bay was a "Death Tree". This mighty tree spread out its branches to tangle the rising sinful soul of any dead man. Caught and turned upside-down, the dead man's soul was left to die by hanging from one of the "Death Tree's" branches. If a person's soul was free of sin they passed freely through the "Death Tree's" branches.

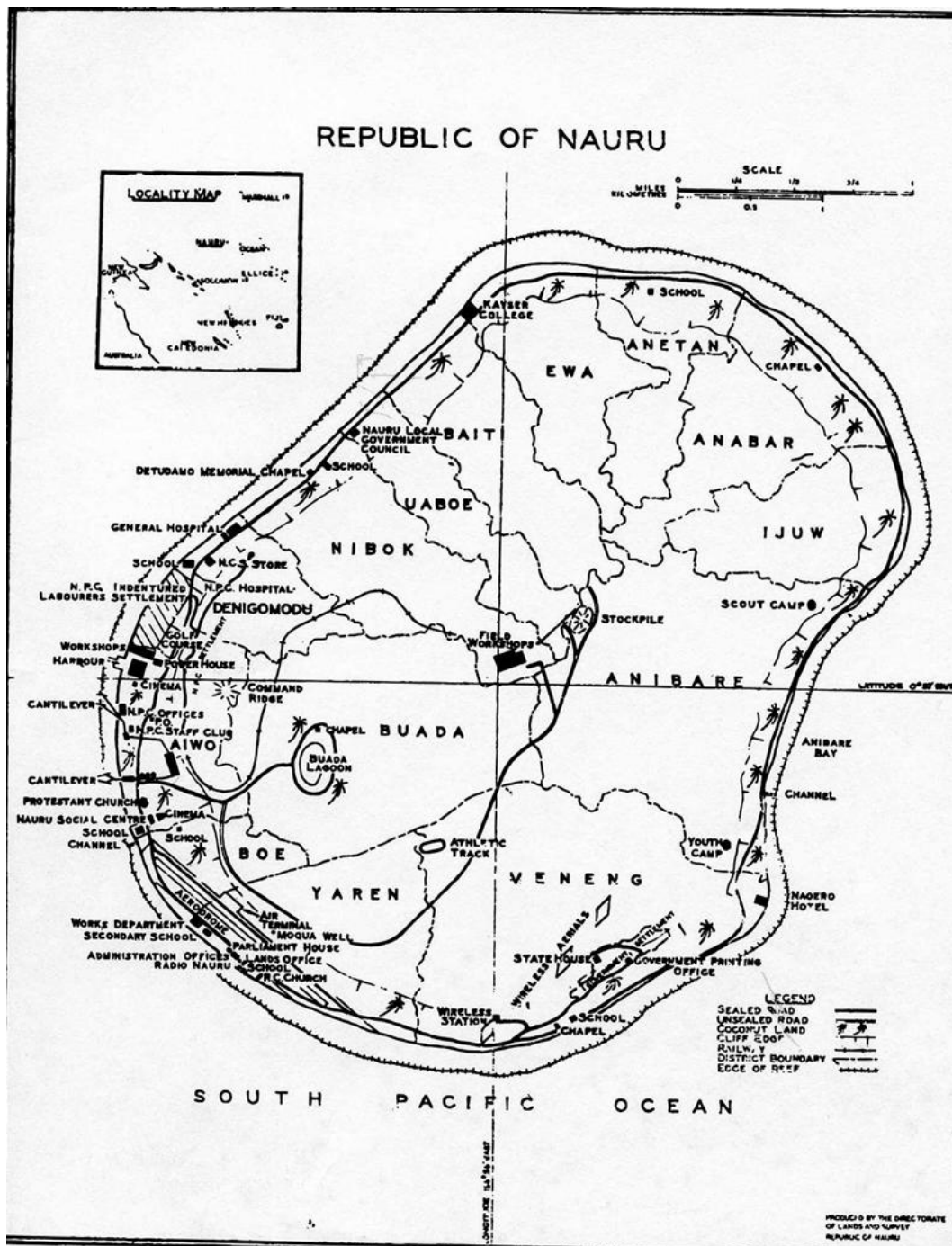


Figure 20.2. Detailed Map of Nauru



Figure 20.3. Early German-built Phosphate Locomotive

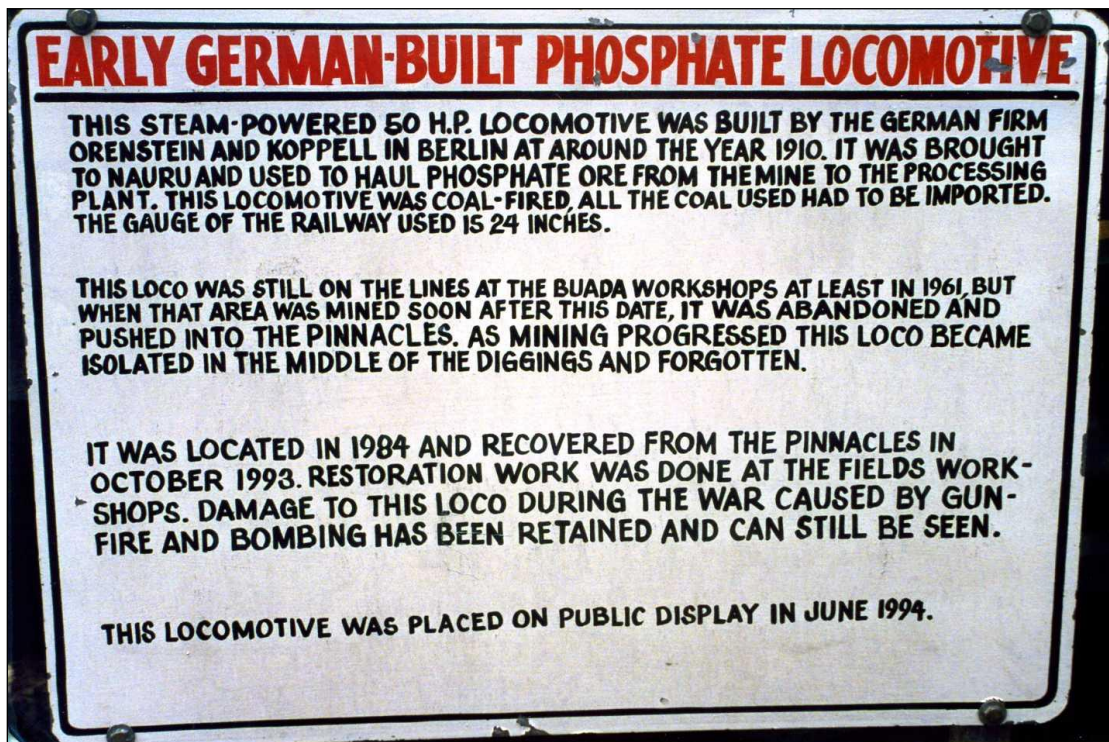


Figure 20.4. Sign explaining the Phosphate Locomotive.

Europeans come to Topside

Nauruans traded food, water and firewood with passing explorer's ships. They also bartered ornaments and tools for steel, cloth and western items. Between 1800 and 1850 whaling ships also visited. Nauruans provided firewood, water and food for the whalers - traditional foods such as fish, pigs and coconuts.

The first new economic activity was the coconut oil or copra trade. This was established in the 1880s. Topside had 985 acres of natural coconut trees. The coconut oil, and later copra, were shipped to Europe and made into other products. Copra production declined in later years because of droughts. This trade had little impact on Nauruan lifestyle, or the environment of Topside.

With the beginning of phosphate mining, the whole pattern of Nauruan lifestyle began to change. Although barter continued, money became the medium of exchange. Trade stores with many goods opened and the use of cash spread. To get cash, many Nauruans were willing to sell the rights to their land.

The economic importance of Nauru to the world increased dramatically with the discovery of high-grade phosphate rock. The deposits were mined continuously after 1907. Disruptions during World Wars I and II caused only minor delays to phosphate digging, processing and export.

Questions and Activities

Fill in the blanks..

Write the correct word from the list below in the spaces provided to complete the sentence.

cash economy, provisions, declined, weaving, manufacture, medium

8. Copra production _____ in later years because of drought.

9. Nauruans provided _____ for passing ships.

10. Coconut oil and copra were used in Europe to _____ soaps and cooking supplies.
11. Although barter continued, money became the _____ of exchange.
12. Old crafts such as _____ began to be forgotten.
13. When Nauruans received land rents and money from selling copra they shifted to a _____.

The *British Phosphate Commission (BPC)*

Mining companies played a significant role in the sad history of Nauru after 1900. After losing their land to mining, Nauruans had to abandon parts of their traditional lifestyle for the rest of their lives.

There was never a firm commitment by the mining company *BPC* to return Topside to its former state. It should have been clear to *BPC* that the land they were leaving was very important to the people of Nauru. In the 1960s local people and experts in environmental protection could see that many centuries would be needed for the forest to grow back. The natural plant species were scattered and stunted on Topside in comparison to the few unmined forest areas.

Nauru Topside had always been slowly changing. During thousands of centuries natural changes took place. However, a new element on Topside was the machine. The steel shovels, tractors, scoops and diggers reduced this tiny island to a man made mystery island; like a moon landscape.

A conservation and preservation plan for Topside was never implemented. Recently, the cleaning of individual cultural sites by the Culture and Tourism Department has encouraged school children to make organised excursions to Topside. Fieldwork excursions and observations by students on Topside will help to promote conservation and preservation programs.

In Schools

Social Science programs in Nauruan schools have recently included Nauruan Studies. Thirteen year old students study their indigenous civilisation, its origins, history, people, the phosphate bearing lands, sea tenure, political organisation and other traditional features of Nauruan life. Later they study neighbouring countries and world histories.

Our schools want to educate Nauruan children on the laws and customs of their own country. The aim is to develop a deep knowledge of the land which Nauruans make home. With this understanding, Nauruans can feel secure and rooted in the land from which they get their sustenance. The phosphate is fertiliser to Australians, New Zealanders and Europeans, but it is the marrow of Nauruan people's bones.

In May 1997, the Department of Culture and Tourism had a National Writers' Seminar. The topic was "Indigenous People Writing for Cultural Maintenance". The workshop discussed Nauruan's deep roots and attachment to the land. The aim was to create an awareness of the mother land. It reminded Nauruans that the nation is the centre of our being, and the country of our hearts.

Once the schools and the general public develop a concern about Topside, then more programs will be introduced. The presence of a new museum near the University of the South Pacific Centre in Nauru is a good start. This is one way of showing interest in the conservation and preservation of cultural sites.

Questions and Activities

14. What was the '*BPC*'?

15. What has caused the greatest change to Topside?

16. Write a sentence on each of the following and their role in Topside:

(a) *BPC*

(b) Schools

(c) The Museum

17. What does this statement mean: "it is the marrow of Nauruan people's bones"?

The Future Use of Topside

Nauru is a very small nation but its problems are big. The main environmental problem is Topside land degradation. Topside has been scattered throughout the world in the form of cheap fertilisers. This has helped grow food for the entire world. In a few years mining will stop. The phosphate will be gone. In the future Nauru cannot base its economy upon phosphate revenues.

To solve this problem Nauruans must develop a variety of new skills. Nauru is trying to diversify its economy by finding new uses for Nauruan land. A new fish co-op opened in 1999 and a yacht marina is being built at Anibare Bay. New enterprises must contribute to the economic life of Nauru. There is a need for change.

In 1969 Nauru took over mining. The Nauru Phosphate Commission is owned by the government and the people. Over 60% of the revenue from phosphate exports is being invested in long term trust funds. This will provide an income for Nauruan people when the phosphate is exhausted. Investment in business, hotels, real estate and banks outside Nauru at first provided a stockpile against the time when the phosphate deposits are exhausted. The airline *Air Nauru* is an example of such an investment. However, these investments were not always successful and several were very poorly chosen or managed. Today, Nauru is not a wealthy country.

A tourism industry cannot immediately be established on Nauru. Like plant re-growth, it takes a long time to bear fruit. In the words of a Nauruan song lamenting the fate of Topside:

All our lands on the hill

No longer can be used

Will become home of craters and rocks

It is difficult for non-Nauruans to know how Nauruans feel about the damage to Topside. No longer can Topside be used for traditional means of survival. Topside is now only used for masts for the television station, radar scanning, *Air Nauru*, and *Radio Nauru*. On the old mine lands, there is a

rubbish dump, a deserted incinerator and a sports oval. The height of the central plateau above sea level has been taken advantage of in this manner. Very little space remains on Topside for catching noddy birds. Several areas on Topside have been used for illegal rubbish dumps.

The majority of Nauruans are thankful to God for the gift of phosphate deposits. But this apparent blessing has turned into an extremely negative situation. Today the phosphate is almost all gone. Nauruans depend on their monthly phosphate cheques, and only 66% of Nauruans have paid work. As there are no other industries, Nauruan society is completely dependent on imports for their food supply. The land which has been mined is no longer valuable. What happens next?

Questions and Activities

18. Why have Nauruans invested in overseas business?
19. List three reasons why tourists might want to visit Topside.
20. Suggest three alternative uses of Topside when mining ends.

Acknowledgements

Mrs Susie Sela, Mr Lucian Kii, Mr John Obed Ailili, Mrs Tokasa Vitayaki, Mr Antonio David Garabwan (Senior History Teacher, Kayser College) and Dr. R.G. Koep (Principal, Kayser College).

References

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